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SUBJECT: PRT KHOST: A FRONTLINE "HUMAN CAPITAL" STRATEGY:
FORMER TALIBAN FIGHTERS, MADRASSA STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITY
GRADUATES AS COUNTERINSURGENTS -- AND PARTNERS

Classified By: PRT Director Valerie C. Fowler for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) SUMMARY: Counter-insurgency (COIN) efforts in Khost Province include new programs specifically targeted at building Afghan "human capital." Three primary initiatives have been designed for ex-Taliban fighters and their families (wives and children), madrassa students, and university graduates. These groups form the principal parts of our efforts to "build" the Afghan people in Khost alongside the province's security forces and strengthen its local government capabilities. For these pilot programs to be successful over the long term and expanded to meet current demand, however, additional and sustained resources are required. Notably, Khost's sizable population of former Taliban fighters -- the Afghans best positioned to "talk" most effectively to their still-active Taliban counterparts in North Waziristan tribal areas -- have shown a willingness to be cooperative. They comprise the most important local element in any Taliban outreach initiative in the border region.

12. (U) SUMMARY CONT'D: Similarly, moderate madrassa students seek more training opportunities in Khost (English language and computer classes). Their battle inside mosques and madrassas with more extreme classmates and mullahs remains among the most important -- and most unseen to outsiders -- in Pashtun communities. Khost University graduates face daunting employment prospects, despite being among the province's (and country's) most educated population. An internship program in various Khost provincial government ministry offices has helped transition some graduates into the workplace, but not enough; too many still see their future outside Afghanistan, not in it. Prioritized and sustained U.S. resources (CERP initially, other sources eventually) will help move each of these strategic groups into a more effective and lasting counter-insurgency partnership. END SUMMARY.

EX-TALIBAN: WHAT ABOUT US?
"FOOT SOLDIERS" WILL FOLLOW

13. (U) "Human capital" efforts in Khost include new projects designed to improve the integration of former Taliban fighters into home communities and the labor market -- and to attract more reconcilees, including so-called Taliban "foot soldiers." The Afghan national reconciliation program (PTS) has largely proven to be ineffective in Khost, according to dozens of PTS participants, the provincial governor and other officials. Once "reconciled" and back in Khost, former

Taliban fighters roundly claim that there is no follow-up from the Kabul-based national reconciliation office. Former Taliban claim that hundreds of more fighters in the North Waziristan region of Pakistan and Miram Shah area would consider reconciliation if they were to see concrete improvements in the program. Many argue that active midlevel commanders and Taliban "foot soldiers" are most susceptible to outreach; high-level Taliban have different interests and require a different, high-level approach. COMMENT: In Khost, two former midlevel commanders led followers over the border to reconcile: one led 35, the other a dozen. Each has said "hundreds more" could be persuaded, provided certain conditions are met. END COMMENT.

LITTLE MONEY GOES LONG WAY STILL,
BUT MORE NEEDED FOR LASTING EFFECT

¶4. (U) Through small seed grants provided by the Embassy's Public Affairs Section and a separate allotment from USAID's local governance program, three events were held in Khost for ex-Taliban fighters. Each included local media, who widely covered the meetings. Humanitarian supplies and work tools (wheelbarrows, picks, etc) were provided to three groups of approximately 50 former Taliban "foot soldiers"; in two other separate events, school uniforms were distributed to the former fighters, children (mostly sons, but some daughters).

Khost's education director reassured the groups publicly that "all children" of former Taliban fighters would be welcomed at local schools.

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¶5. (U) Programs focused on skills training -- such as auto mechanic and generator repair work -- have generated growing interest among former Taliban fighters. The Khost PTS director believes that a six-month transition program for former fighters would be effective and a reasonable timeline.

A former midlevel Taliban commander told PRT Khost that fighters are looking for "just some basic help for us and our families." COMMENT: Recently announced efforts by the Afghan government, through the IDLG office, to reinvigorate outreach efforts to reconcilable mid- and lower level Taliban reflects a public recognition of failure of the national program. END COMMENT.

¶6. (U) Approximately 30 wives of ex-Taliban fighters volunteered (with husband approval, essential in the conservative Pashtun belt) for a skills training program. Notably, virtually all of the currently reconciled Taliban in Khost actively sought PRT support to help get their children into area schools, as well as enrolled in computer and English courses. A symbolic first step -- distribution of new blue school uniforms -- represented a turning point for many (fathers and schoolchildren alike); however, due to limited funds, only about half of the school-aged children could be included in the pilot program. Local media interviewed both fathers and sons about the importance of education, messages that were later carried in the FATA region.

¶7. (U) Another group of teen-aged ex-Taliban fighters has begun to take English language and computer courses in Khost (tuition costs discretely covered by the Embassy and USAID grants). Demand for this program has outstripped available spots. Note: Several of the former Taliban told Khost DOS rep that while in Pakistan, they skipped religious classes to learn about the internet, but lacked funds to continue follow-on courses once back in Afghanistan. End note.

RELIGIOUS STUDENTS: THE FIGHT
INSIDE MOSQUES AND MADRASSAS

¶8. (U) Some of the most important, but largely unseen, battles in Khost occur inside its mosques and madrassas. Hundreds of moderate religious students have described to PRT Khost over several months their attempts to influence peers to move away from extremism and radical Islam. What a majority want from the PRT and coalition is indirect support, such as funds to cover tuition costs for English and computer courses. In 2008, approximately 250 of these students enrolled in a PRT-sponsored and USAID-funded program. Local cooperative mullahs estimate that another 500 madrassa students in Khost could easily be identified for future programs if more funds were made available. Discrete oversight of the program involves a USAID NGO mechanism as well as local staff employed by the PRT. Notably, there is no direct U.S. role, in order to ensure safety of the students and decrease the likelihood of Taliban propaganda that might attempt to show coalition "interference" in religion.

U.S.: ANTI-ISLAM?

¶9. (U) More broadly, a majority of madrassa students and moderate mullahs in Khost also support more active U.S. engagement in Kabul with the Ministry of Education (MoE) regarding religious education issues. They claim that government construction of madrasses has persistently lagged behind that of regular schools (primary, secondary and for girls). Many believe the neglect has been an intentional slight, alongside vocal U.S. support for non-religious and girls' education -- but silence on all things madrassa or Islam-related. Most religious students prefer to stay inside Afghanistan for their education; however, due to a lack of options, they enroll at madrassas in Pakistan's tribal areas. Once there, many readily admit the chances of extremism "infecting" (their word) the average madrassa student's mind increases significantly. One admitted in a recent conversation that "it took two years for them to convert me, but in the end, they did, and I am still ashamed to tell my father what happened in Pakistan."

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¶10. (U) The students likewise urge greater international involvement to encourage quality moderate mullahs to return to Afghanistan. Currently, many of the madrassa students have stated they feel mullahs and religious students are "targeted" by coalition forces and unfairly perceived to be suicide bombers. A dozen Khost madrassa students have told the Khost PRT that inaction on madrassa issues has led a growing number of religious students to believe the U.S. and coalition are in effect anti-Islam. Most say they understand that with greater MoE support, there will be greater expectations such as curriculum oversight. The madrassa students, however, largely believe the neglect has been intentional -- by their own government and by us.

UNIVERSITY GRADUATES: LIFE
AFTER GRADUATION, WHAT'S NEXT?

¶11. (U) Khost University, like other universities across Afghanistan, stands as a strategic anchor in the province. Approximately 2,000 students are enrolled, across diverse faculties (computer science, law, agriculture, etc.) The students come from all of Afghanistan's provinces and, collectively, represent the future face and most developed "human capital" potential of the country. PRT engagement with the university only began recently; in 2007, a group of political science and law students asked the PRT, upon an initial visit to their campus, "why did it take you so long to come here?" Persistent lack of employment opportunities after graduation remains the students' biggest challenge. The

most qualified have said that they see their futures "outside" Afghanistan. Many criticize the government for not establishing post-graduation training opportunities, which would vest them in civil service job tracks, and signal from the government a long-term investment in them as future Afghan leaders.

¶12. (U) The PRT has attempted to fill this void between the university graduate population and government in Khost. About 20 Khost University graduates have been placed in various six-month internships with local government officials, including the governor's office, mayor's office, and other line ministry provincial offices (rural development, agriculture, education and among key security force leadership). The graduates are expected to work 20 hours per week and are given a small monthly stipend. Most of the graduates have expressed positive views about the internship, with some optimistic about future employment in various ministry offices. Two interns stressed that for corruption to end, new leaders from the next generation of Afghans was required; all have argued that more internships -- including at ministry headquarter offices -- would help move new leaders into key positions faster, rather than have university graduates seek UN employment in Kabul or outside the country.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) These three pilot programs in Khost represent initial steps forward for three key groups and our engagement at the PRT level with them. Taken together, former Taliban fighters, madrassa students and university graduates form a promising "counter-insurgent" block. At present, coalition funds remain primarily directed toward hard infrastructure improvements (via CERP); more should be prioritized with "human capital" purposes in mind. Restrictions that might inhibit more creative uses of U.S. funds should be lifted or modified to allow for maximum flexibility. Without an active and sustained "human capital" approach at the PRT tactical level, however, our default emphasis will continue to be on engineering buildings (or roads) and not enough on building the Afghan people. Khost Governor Arsala Jamal has reinforced the need for a greater U.S. focus on Afghan youth in particular, an argument echoed by other influential leaders in the province.

¶14. (C) U.S. funds would be better prioritized with strategic policy objectives in mind to the maximum extent possible, including across the spectrum of our "soft power" goals. PRTs in Afghanistan, however, lack so-called "Quick

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Reaction Funds" (QRF) available to PRTs in Iraq -- resources which are more flexible. Transplanting this mechanism to Afghanistan PRTs (as well as perhaps those led by partner NATO allies which often lack comparable funds) warrants consideration. Our continued lack of emphasis on "human capital" initiatives will likely result in more of the same: physical infrastructure improvements but without the essential, and arguably more pressing, internal human infrastructure element. Afghans in Khost know that the best counter-insurgents will always be Afghan, not American. Former Taliban fighters, madrassa students and university graduates are willing -- but so far underutilized -- partners in the fight. Moving these Afghans into an active counter-insurgent mode will demand more from us first -- and more of our money at the outset. We can then justifiably expect more from them and, realistically, across multiple years.

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